

# Iroko Onlus

## Working to Combat the Trafficking of Nigerian Women and Girls into Italy

ESOHE AGHATISE

*L'auteure parle du travail de Iroko Onlus, un organisme à but non-lucratif établi en Italie qui offre des services aux victimes du trafic dont la majorité sont venues du Nigéria. Cet article présente en détail les programmes et les services offerts par cet organisme ainsi que les initiatives anti-traffic qui ont été implantées.*

Since the mid-1980s, substantial numbers of women and girls from Nigeria have been trafficked into Italy to work as prostitutes. They must learn to cope with a new reality, a new country, and a new social context and often have no support network of friends or family. Some face violence and exploitation from their traffickers and “madams,” some of whom were once trafficked themselves and now “buy” women of their own. The last few years have seen an increasing number of very young girls, in most cases minors, being trafficked to satisfy the ever more exigent requests of the clients.

The debts imposed on the women and girls by their traffickers upon their arrival in Italy are large amounts which can range from US\$30,000 to approximately US\$60,000. The “debts” have to be paid in a matter of a few months, at the risk of violence being used on them and/or on their families in Nigeria by their madams. It should be noted that the girls charge an average US\$10/15 per client and at times, as little as US\$5. Moreover, they are also requested to make an advance payment per month of a minimum of US\$500 to “rent” the roadside spot where they work. Other payments they may incur include a weekly sum US\$35 as contribution for their feeding, buying of expensive, provocative clothing for working (usually sold to them by the madams themselves or by her friends) and the giving of various regular and expensive gifts to their madams each month.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the international trafficking of Nigerian girls is the fact that the majority come from the mid-south region and belong to the Edo (Benin) ethnic group (Aghatise). This is surprising because traditionally, this ethnic group does not socially accept prostitution, sexual promiscuity, or extramarital sexual contact. In this context, one needs to analyse the issue of women moving from their home to prostitute abroad, far away from the “influence” and reach of traditional values, rules, and regulations. Yet, some of these influences are evident in Italy as well. For example, madams are known to impose traditional “juju” rites<sup>1</sup> on

trafficked women to ensure their loyalty and payments of the debts imposed on them.

Many of the trafficked Nigerian women and girls see their “madams” as “benefactors” who “helped” them to escape the extreme poverty and deprivation in which they were living. Thus, in our attempts to provide assistance and support, we must face the possibility of being seen as an enemy of the victim and not as a friend.

### The Need for Activist Responses

Various programs are currently being carried out both in Nigeria and Italy to reduce the harm for victims. While these efforts are laudable, they are not enough. There is a need for more collaboration and networking between governmental agencies and grassroots organizations and NGOs to combat trafficking of women and girls.

Strategies for the prevention of trafficking include education and training programs, especially for female children as well as investment in agricultural and basic-needs industries which address the needs of the people and involves their direct participation. Intensive information campaigns tailored to the social and cultural resistance posed by the people are crucial to raising awareness of the effects of trafficking on parents, family members, friends and others who encourage their children to accept offers of “jobs” abroad.

Also important is the decriminalization of victims and provision of projects in support of victims as well as in the reduction of harms.

Prostitution is not a crime in Italy. It is the exploitation of the sex worker by others that is regarded as a crime. The Italian government actively discourages trafficking by prosecuting traffickers. However, traffickers must be reported and identified by the trafficked victims. Italy is the only European country that passed a law (Law Decree 286/98) that protects the interests of the victims and

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provides protection to those who are able to escape and report their exploiters. Article 18 of this law permits the issue of a residence permit to those victims who wish to remain in Italy and rebuild their lives. This law also has provisions that facilitate the ability of municipal councils, and the organizations working with them, to provide resources and services to those girls and women who want to get out of sex trade. The services offered to victims of trafficking under these new legal provisions have been instrumental in raising awareness among trafficked victims, and resulting in a significant increase in the numbers of those coming forward to report their exploiters and obtain protection under the law (Aghatise).

Presently, there is a proposal in the Italian Parliament to legalize prostitution which, following the Dutch and German models, would permit the prostitutes to work in specified areas and in apartments where the other apartment dwellers are in agreement. Although Iroko Onlus is committed to the decriminalization of prostitution, it is against the legalization of prostitution as we believe it will encourage more trafficking. Furthermore, giving exploiters the opportunities to hide their victims under a guise of "legally consenting 'sex workers'," will make it much more difficult to access victims and provide them with assistance and support.

Research-based solutions give more efficacy to programs aimed at the prevention of trafficking. Therefore, it is necessary to continue conducting research that examines the extent of trafficking, the number of persons as well as groups involved in trafficking, and the identification of geographical areas and groups at risk in sending countries. It is equally important to examine the extent of the damage done in socio-economic, educational and health terms, to the victims themselves, and to the sending and receiving countries. Awareness-raising campaigns in countries of origin, financial assistance/assisted re-entry, and the establishment of a viable economic activity for victims and possible victims are also crucial.

By exchanging information on best practices, anti-trafficking groups and organizations should be able to operate in a more efficacious manner. The creation of a specific database on trafficking and the provision of statistical data on trafficking would be very useful tools for anti-trafficking organizations. Victims should be directly involved in the collection of such data and in the elaboration of project proposals. Sharing their experiences with others would act as deterrence to the acceptance of fake offers of jobs abroad. By giving voice to their experiences, they also become direct protagonists in the fight against trafficking.

### **The Work of Iroko Onlus**

Iroko<sup>2</sup> Onlus is a multicultural, non-profit organization established in Italy in 1998. Currently, our main activities include: cultural mediation and accompaniment

of immigrants to various social, health, and assistance organizations; legal counselling for immigrants on immigration and local residence permit matters; translation of documents for use in finding jobs or in enrolling in state-financed training courses and interpretation for needful immigrants; defence and promotion of immigrants' rights, and where necessary, preventive intervention in their assistance; collaboration with local and international groups and associations to further the aims and objectives of our organization; assistance and accompaniment of immigrants and socially-disadvantaged persons for medical care; assistance in searching for jobs and housing; assistance in learning the basic concepts of Italian language for easier communication; psychological support and use of ethno-mediation and cross-cultural ethno-therapy to assist immigrants, especially victims of trafficking with psychological disorders; and prevention of trafficking through the dissemination of informative materials on the situation of girls and women who accept unspecified "jobs" abroad.

The organization also carries out research and studies on trafficking of women and children and on violence against women and children.

Recently, Iroko Onlus completed a short film, "Viaggio di Non Ritorno" (Journey of No Return) which is being widely distributed throughout Nigeria to warn young people and their families of the risks in accepting spurious offers of lavish life in Europe.

### **Ongoing Programs**

Our ongoing programs are organized around a three-tier program that focuses on 1) the rehabilitation of victims of trafficking and for social/financial assistance to them; 2) employment creation for victims of trafficking, and 3) prevention of trafficking through training and information dissemination.

Current projects include providing emergency, short-term accommodation to immigrant women and children in need, with particular attention to victims of international trafficking for prostitution. Women are housed until they are back on their feet and financially stable. We also provide financial assistance to those who wish to return home.

We have recently completed a research project funded by the United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery which is titled, "Research and Case Studies on the International Trafficking of Nigerian Girls for Prostitution in Italy." This research examines the political, social and cultural motivations behind trafficking of Nigerian women and girls to Italy as well as other European countries for prostitution. During the course of our research, we worked with various associations, religious and lay organizations, government institutions, and local NGOs who are actively working in Nigeria to prevent the trafficking of women and girls.

We also partner with other grassroots organizations and NGOs on a number of anti-trafficking initiatives. We are currently collaborating with the anti-trafficking program "Change" on a European Union-funded STOP II project "Best Practices in Inter-Agency Cooperation." The research was funded by the European Commission STOP II Program (dedicated to preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and all forms of sexual exploitation of children and young people, and to assist the victims of these criminal activities) and the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The aim of the study was to identify the governmental and non-governmental agencies working to combat trafficking in Italy, the UK, Greece, Czech Republic and Romania; to collect and analyze information on their work and the measures undertaken by them; and to collect and analyze information on how the organizations work together to prevent and combat trafficking in women and girls. An important aspect of the study is the establishment of an international network of professionals working on the issue of trafficking.

We are also partners in another project with EU DAPHNE that focuses on preventative measures to fight violence against children, young people, and women.

### Conclusion

Trafficking is not a phenomenon that affects just one or a few countries. It affects all countries in the world. It is on this global basis that efforts must be made to address the issue and to implement anti-trafficking initiatives.

There is much that still needs to be done with respect to the protection of trafficked victims and in the fight against trafficking. There is need for more coordination and networking between governments of sending and receiving countries. Law enforcement agencies should be trained and given better resources to assist them in the identification of victims and possible victims of trafficking. Traffickers and pimps should not be protected and can easily be brought to justice if proper action is taken against them. Effective measures should be taken by governments to eliminate those social and cultural factors that encourage the sale and trafficking of women and children into prostitution as well as into other forms of indentured labour. Moreover, we must recognize that the unequal and exploitative global economic structure that has relegated a part of the world into perennial poverty is unacceptable.

In a global socio-cultural environment where media images and social stereotypes promote the exploitation of women in prostitution, where prostitution is accepted as a valid "employment" alternative, and where it is acceptable for the human body to be commodified and commercialized, the fight against trafficking and the exploitation of women, children and men trapped in various forms of modern-day slavery is bound to fail. These factors must be

addressed and eliminated for anti-trafficking initiatives and programs to succeed.

*Esohe Aghatise graduated in law from the University of Ife and was called to the Nigerian Bar in 1984. She obtained a MA in International Economic and Trade Law from the University of Benin, Nigeria and also completed Post-graduate Diploma in International Economic and Trade Law from the University Institute of European Studies in 1992. She later studied for her doctorate at the Universities of "La Bocconi" of Milan, Turin, and Bergamo. She was appointed Expert on Trafficking to the UN DAW Expert Groups' Meeting in 2002 and has researched and published articles on trafficking in national and international Journals. She is the founding Director of Association Iroko Onlus in Turin, Italy.*

<sup>1</sup>These are oath-taking rituals in which parts of the body of the girls (i.e., pubic hair, nails, menstrual blood, hair and pieces of intimate clothing) are taken and placed before traditional shrines. The girls are made to swear an oath not to disclose the origin of their trip abroad, to pay their "debt" (usually not stated at the moment of stipulating the "blood contract"), and never to report to the police.

<sup>2</sup>Iroko is the name of a tree which has magical properties and, in part, denotes protection and fighting back.

### References

Aghatise, Esohe "Research and Case-study on the International Trafficking of Nigerian Girls for Prostitution in Italy." Unpublished manuscript, 2001.

## MARIE JANICK BELLEAU

### Hommage à Hale-Bopp

Rendez-vous nocturne  
Lire du Ionesco  
Sur un air de Strauss  
En goûtant ta chevelure  
Dans quelque quatre mille ans.

*Marie Janick Belleau's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*